FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

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I will never hear that story again – the story of loaves and fishes; of such a large crowd fed by such a modest amount of food – a story of what Jesus can do with seemingly insignificant resources, without remembering a day last April.

I was in Ocijek, Croatia with Sue and Debbie Vial, and Duncan Hanson, Worldwide Ministries Division. We were there to bring greetings and encouragement to the Croatian Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and politicians, and specifically to visit our partners in mission. And mission workers, Steve and Michele Kurtz of the Evangelical Theological Seminary which we support and to the Agape Project, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), OGHS.

The Agape Project focuses on ministry with refugees … part of the very difficult situation in Central Europe is the presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees: people of one ethnic-religious community who suddenly find themselves displaced, homeless and without resources or hope: Bosnian Muslims in Croatia, Croatian Catholics in Serbia, Serbian Orthodox in Bosnia-Herzegovina. None of the states has resources or in many cases it seemed to us, the will to deal with the situation. So Agape stands in a very real way between life and death, hope and despair.

Agape sponsors feeding centers which provide soup and a loaf of bread to refugees daily. At the center I visited, the people in line were all Muslims who had lived for years in a section outside Ocijek – which had been attacked and occupied by Serbian forces. The Serbs took away the men and boys and executed them, raped many of the women, leveled many houses and moved Serbian people into the rest.

The people waiting in line for food were all women. They bring their own containers for the soup: pots, jars, jugs, even a scrub bucket – for one ladle of soup per person, one loaf of bread for every two.

I was asked to ladle soup, for a picture which I did very self-consciously. On the way out, a Muslim woman asked who we were. Peter told her – they are Presbyterians from America. They provide this food. She took my hands in hers and began to weep. Through the interpreter, she said, "Tell him that my husband and son are both dead. My home is gone. I have nothing. Tell him I say thank God for him."

Such a great need and such a modest amount of food, but it was salvation for her, literally, and it was a means of grace, an expression of God's love in Jesus Christ.

One time something happened that changed forever the way his friends thought about him and about their own lives. He had called disciples. They had traveled with him as he walked through

Galilee teaching in synagogues, healing, proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom. People heard him eagerly – what he said, the way he said it, the way he welcomed all, healed all – was new, refreshing, food for their deepest hunger.

And so his reputation spread and the crowds who came to see, hear, receive blessing grew. Now they were bringing elderly, crippled, sick, children – following him from town to town And it is to get away for a moment for a rest, that Jesus and his friends are up on a mountain for a small sabbath. But here comes the crowd again to hear him.

And Jesus asks Philip, "How are we going to feed all these people?" Nobody has mentioned food. They have come for healing and comfort and encouragement and restoration, but Jesus is thinking about dinner.

What happens next is pretty funny actually. John meant it to be, I believe. Philip's answer – dinner? Buy dinner for this crowd? Why six months' wages wouldn't buy them even a snack.

In other presentations, the disciples look around a bit, and from among themselves come up with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. In John's Gospel, it's a little boy who Andrew finds who contributes the five loaves and two fish. Did he volunteer or did Andrew volunteer for him – or confiscate his lunch?

"Make the people sit down." And he fed them. First he prayed. "Blessed are thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth."

He prayed the ancient Hebrew blessing his people had prayed for centuries. No Jew ever prayed that prayer or heard that prayer, in synagogue, around the family table, in ghettoes, refugee camps, concentration camps, extermination camps – no Jew hears that prayer without remembering one of their oldest and most precious stories and its promise: about their people in the wilderness and their hunger and how God provides manna to eat and saves them.

And so, Jesus feeds them. And it is enough for their hunger. Abundant, in fact. More food than they can eat in fact. So much food that after 5,000 people eat, there are twelve baskets of left-over fragments.

Even though it is a favorite, this story challenges us at several levels. First, intellectually. Our first problem is with its improbability. What happened? We're probably the only people in history who ask it that way or who hang the veracity or relevance of the story on the answer.

I don't know what happened. Five thousand people were hungry and got fed.

Energetic Old Testament scholars suggest that manna was the sweet white secretion of a common desert bush which falls at night, crystallizes and is edible. Maybe it was something like that.

Or the little boy's wonderful and childlike generosity inspired everybody, or more likely, shamed everybody so everyone got out the picnic basket they had brought along for the day's outing and

shared. I've always like that one. Sounds like a great church picnic and I'm headed right past the Jello-O salads to the fried chicken.

I heard Parker Palmer talk about this story at a retreat and he told a story about being in an airplane that pulled away from the gate, taxied out to a corner of the field and stopped. The flight attendant came on and said, "I have some bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is that the airport where we are headed is socked in, shut down. We've looked at the alternatives and there are none. So we're staying here for a few hours. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food and it's lunch time." Everybody groaned. Some passengers started to get angry but then, Palmer says, the flight attendant did something incredible.

She went on, "Now I know for some of you this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch (this story is pretty old, apparently). Some of you may have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care much one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So, I'll tell you what we're going to do. I have a couple of bread baskets here and we're going to pass them around and I'm asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along – some peanut butter crackers, candy bars, and some of you have a few Life Savers, or chewing gum or RollAides. And if you don't have anything edible, you have a picture of your children or spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or a bookmark, or business card. Everybody put something in and then we'll reverse the process. We'll pass the baskets around and everyone can take out what he or she needs."

"Well," Palmer said, "what happened next was wonderful. The griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags. Some even got up and opened luggage stored overhead and got out boxes of candy, a bottle of wine. People were laughing and talking. She had transformed an angry community focused on its own need and deprivation into a community of sharing and celebration."

After the flight, which eventually did proceed, Parker Palmer stopped on his way off the plane and said to her, "Do you know there's a story in the Bible about what you did back there? It's about Jesus feeding a lot of people with very little food." "Yes," she said, "I know that story. That's why I did what I did."

I'm not sure we can or should objectify this story. I'm content to know that crowds of people came to Jesus because he met their needs, that in him their deepest hunger was satisfied. I'm content to know that what happened that day was a very important occasion in the life of his friends and became a very important memory which later they wrote down in order never to forget it.

And the story challenges us at a cultural level – our culture's deepest and most important values – with its suggestion that when resources are shared/given, God's salvation is activated.

In Studs Terkel's book *American Dreams: Lost and Found*, the author interviewed an interesting cross-section of people and asked them what they meant by the phrase, "The American Dream."

A successful business executive put it succinctly.

"The American Dream is to be better off then you are. How much money is 'enough money?' 'Enough money' is always a little bit more than you have. There's never enough – of anything."

Peter Gomes, preacher to the University of Harvard, has written a fine new book on the Bible, *The Good Book*. There is a chapter on the "Good Life." Gomes says that when the talk gets around to the good life with the people he knows best, university students – young adults – sooner or later, it concludes with economic security. "I'm not greedy," one of his students told him. "I just want all that I can get."

It reminded him, he said, of that wonderful *New Yorker* cartoon several years ago around Thanksgiving. Two Pilgrims are leaning on the deck rail of the Mayflower as it puts into Plymouth Harbor. "My immediate goal is religious freedom," one of the Pilgrims says to the other, "but my long-range plan is to get into real estate."

The church's responsibility is to show the world an alternative to all that to live the saving love of Jesus which meets human need – hunger, sickness, fear, anxiety – wherever it finds it, and just as importantly, is a means of grace for those privileged to express it.

The church congregations, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is relevant only to the degree that it does that.

Let me tell you about how it works in mission. Peter Kuzmic, President of Evangelical Seminary and Agape, calls it authenticity and says that without authenticity Christian missionary activity in a world where competing faith claims are made belligerently, is just so much empty rhetoric.

Peter introduced me to a delightful Croatian of Serbian descent, Antol Bolag. Antol was a businessman, accountant. He gave his life to Christ, quit his job, joined Agape. Because of his business skills, he is in charge of a special project to rebuild homes destroyed in war, in Sector E, around Ocijek. Vukovar is much in the news: used to be Croatia; invaded, occupied by Serbian army; Muslims (and Croatian Catholics) were driven out and executed; buildings were leveled. It is now under U.N. jurisdiction and they are attempting to rebuild and resettle.

Antol is in charge of rebuilding a Muslim village. He assembles funding – from churches, from European governments, the Fund for Ireland contributes and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He buys raw materials, hires workers and rebuilds the village, one house at a time.

Meeting with Muslim mayor. No mosque? Why? You're Christian. You want to convert us. Why would you want to help us rebuild our mosque?

We will help you rebuild your mosque because we are Christians and Jesus tells us to love our neighbors and told the story about the good Samaritan. And one time fed 5,000 people because they were hungry.

And the story challenges us personally, at the place where each of us is hungry.

The word here is simple for the church and for each of us. Use what you have; don't save it. Share it. Spend it. Give it away. Invest it creatively. It will be enough. You will have enough. You will have more, in fact, than you ever imagined.

It's a basic attitude toward life actually. When I'm asked to teach preaching I have students read an unlikely book because it addresses preachers' propensity to be cautious and save and hoard. In Annie Dillard's fine book, *The Writing Life*, which is a reflection on the craft of writing but in actuality, is an essay on living, she wrote:

"One of the things I know about writing (substitute living) is this: spend it all: shoot it: play it: lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book: give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for another place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water.

"Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes." [p.78-79]

The word for us in the story of the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* is a saving word which means an insight that could save your life. When Jesus shifted the focus from looking at those loaves and fishes as a scarce resource to be saved, conserved, hoarded, to looking at them as a precious gift of God, a resource to be used and shared, he moved from fear to love and from death to life. From despair over the fact that meager personal resources are not adequate for huge problems, to joy over the discovery that when we bring what we have, God multiplies, empowers, creates and provides. [See Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns*, p. 69]

The word itself is the bread of life. To know and to live like that is to be saved. It is food for your journey. To commit your life, your skills, your education, your energy and passion, your resources – everything, to God and God's kingdom on earth, to causes that matter, to the alleviation of hunger, to justice, to peace, to education, to children, to offer up your loaves and fishes is, quite simply, to be gloriously alive. The promise is that when you do that, God will provide.

There will be enough, enough of what you need, and if the truth be told, enough of what you have wanted and longed for, and hungered after all your life – bread for your journey.

Amen.

That is the sermon I prepared but I want the privilege of a post script.

The text challenges us intellectually, culturally and personally – at this level to offer to Jesus Christ what we have and are.

But deeper still, you and I hunger, and at some level in each of us, we come to Jesus with that hunger … find ourselves in that crowd following, hoping for a blessing, a word, touch, food ….

I need a word this morning. A dear friend is dying, the father of my daughter-in-law, my grandchildren's other grandfather, a faithful Presbyterian Elder, a good man who a month ago was enjoying his retirement, and he will die soon, and I am in that crowd following Jesus.

So are some of you who yesterday lost a dear and precious friend, Wade Boggs, whose faithfulness and energy and love blessed Montreat to many years. You are in that crowd.

And so, at some level each of us is there with our deepest needs, our fears, our grief, our hopes and dreams, our hunger. And I want only to say to you, and to myself, that Jesus Christ is God's answer, God's mysterious amazing grace, God's food for our journey.

And I want to do something not in the bulletin. I want you to hear again God's precious word as I heard it at daybreak, with soft rain falling and the mists rising and as it became food for me.

John 6.

Gracious God, we thank you for your love which lived in Jesus and which continues to live among us. We bring to you what we have: we offer our lives to you for the work of your kingdom.

And we bring our hunger. Feed us with the Bread of Life, in Jesus Christ our Lord.